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### Luther and the Peasant War

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### LUTHER AND THE PEASANT WAR.

The period of transition between the Middle Ages and the Modern Era was an era of upheavals, political and social. This was nothing new in the history of the world. We observe such epochs at the beginning of the Christian Era and at the Fall of the Roman Empire. They are at once periods of death-struggles, and heart-beats of a new life. Such times are always marked by great leaders and great events---great in this sense that they strike the keynote, that they set the pace, for time to come.

The sixteenth century would not be such a great turning-point in the history of the world, were it not for the Reformation and the man without whom that word would never be spelled with a capital -- MARTIN LUTHER. The man who gave the death-blow to the idea that there was only one ruler in the church and in the world---His Holiness the Pontiff at Rome; that the sacred Scriptures were sacred only to the extent of the papal Curia's arbitrary interpretation; that governments in Christian countries existed by, and subject to, pontifical--not divine--right and sanction; in short, that anything at all in this world that did not bear the stamp of "Nihil Obstat" was eo ipso anathema; that man was none other than The Mighty Man of Wittenberg and Worms. History--cold, hard, impartial facts, bear witness to this fact, hair-splitting controversies and sophistries notwithstanding.

Throughout his career, Luther shared the fate of great men before him and after his time. Entirely oblivious of the fact that Luther was a mere mortal man, with an ample share of shortcomings, overenthusiastic worshippers on the one hand place him on a pedestal "a little lower than the angels", while, on the other hand, bigoted, hopelessly biased calumniators consign



him to a level beyond the extremities of Dante's Inferno. Comparatively few tread the safe and sane middle ground.

No episode in Luther's life has served to bring out such definite, ardent statements concerning his actions and views as did the Peasant Revolt in Germany in the year 1525. Through the Leipzig Debate of 1519 and the Diet of Worms in 1521, the attention of princes, prelates, and people had been directed to, and fixed on, every step he took, and every word he spoke and penned. Friend and foe began to gather in respective camps, both eagerly awaiting a concurrence of issues or events, anything at all, which would engage Luther's attention and perhaps, nay rather consequently, result in a stand taken by, and in a statement from, this man of the hour. Franz von Sickingen and Ulrich von Hutten had dreamt of a Germany <sup>for the Germans, Duke George</sup> of Saxony and others were itching for an opportunity to force the execution of the Edict of Worms and the eradication of the "damned Lutheran sect". Since 1517 western Europe had received no less than four thrills, all from Luther, and was eager for more. As seen in a bird's-eye view of 1927, the Middle Ages were receiving the "Gnadenstosz", the Modern Age was dealing the blow, the grandstand was thundering both applause and rage. And then something happened. One might compare it to the gasp of suspense and the groan of disgust or disappointment which fills the air when, at the height of action, something checks a rapid sequence of events and sends it off for a while on a tangent. Such was the effect of Luther's stand on the Peasant War.

This episode has made Luther one of the most misunderstood men of all times. "There you have him, the very son of the foul fiend!" was the triumphant cry of his enemies, which made very many of his followers hesitate, shake their heads, cast sidelong glances at the other side, and finally join them for lack of understanding and courage to investigate.

It is not the object of these lines so much to analyse the causes for the above-mentioned facts, as to aim at an unprejudiced view of Luther's attitude. The analytical and critical element will be introduced only as a



means to an end.

The question arises: Is it possible to do justice to Luther and to the time in which he lived without stressing analysis and criticism to the extent that one of the modern biographers of Luther, Grisar, has succeeded in doing? After perusing a number of chapters in his volume one is much inclined to test him with the standard set for biographers by Dr. Heinrich Boehmer, and to find that the biographer is wanting. Boehmer says, to quote in full: "Persoenlichkeit ist das nicht weiter analysierbare, immer in Bewegung und Flusz befindliche geheimnisvolle und doch immer deutlich wahrnehmbare Etwas, das in, mit und unter den genannten Eigenschaften sich auswirkt. Dies 'Etwas' zu erfassen und seine Wirkungen zu schildern, das ist die eigentliche Aufgabe des Biographen.---Er wird aber jene Aufgabe nur dann loesen koennen, wenn er ueber dem Analysieren und Ableiten, das in dem positivistischen Wissenschaftsbetrieb der letzten Jahrzehnte die ausschlagende Rolle spielte, nicht ganz die Faehigkeit verloren hat, seine Persoenlichkeit in ihrer lebendigen Ganzheit auf sich wirken zu lassen und, wenn dieselben in den Quellen, die ihm zur Verfuegung stehen, auch in ihrer Ganzheit deutlich spiegelt". (Boehmer, Der junge Luther, pp. 17,18.)

The biographer referred to has subjected himself to Luther's personality, but not long enough. He has not succeeded in overcoming a fatal bias, although he makes very elaborate and skilful attempts to dispel such a suspicion. Boehmer upholds this criticism by saying: "Man braucht, wenn man Luther kennen lernen will, nicht erst irgendwelche Vorsichtsmaszregeln zu treffen, sich nicht erst mit vieler Muehe in ihn einzufuehlen, nicht jedes seiner Worte erst sorgfaeltig abzuwaegen und argwoehnisch hin-und herzuwenden, um einen vielleicht beabsichtigten Neben-oder Untersinn herauszubekommen, Es genuegt, ihn zu hoeren." Such is the spirit in which this treatise is written.

Peasant revolts were nothing new in Europe. For certuries there had



been such uprisings in all parts of the country, and with each generation the frequency and severity of these disturbances had steadily increased. Especially in Hungary, France, and in practically every part of Germany untold damage had been done to towns and rural districts, untold horrors had been perpetrated, veritable rivers of blood had flowed. And when such a catastrophe had subsided, there was nothing to show for the trouble except ruin and misery. It seemed as though the so-called civilized nations were striving for an ideal, a pinnacle of perfection, in the art of lacerating their own vitals. For no sooner had a new generation become able to take an interest in affairs, than the nobility would remember past wrongs, and would do all in their power to make life miserable for the descendants of those who had slain their sires, burnt their castles and plundered their coffers; and the peasantry would recall the smouldering ruins of their cottages, the promising fields trampled into morasses by hunting parties of their lords, the fine cattle and produce which had to be delivered to the collectors of tithes, the insults to women and children and all the other deeds which kept their blood at a fever heat, and again they, too, would feed the fires of hate, to let them flare up at the opportune time and under the guidance of some fanatical leader.

The attempts that were sometimes made to establish a better relationship between the opposing forces were either straw-fires, or, if they really aimed at the seat of trouble, were frustrated by suspicion, lack of understanding, hate, and all other negative attributes. In most cases taxes and tithes were increased, more and more forced labor was demanded, restrictions were drawn closer in regard to hunting, fishing, and woodgathering, and the gulf between lord and vassal steadily widened.

The unutterably sad feature about these times is the fact that no one really knew what was the matter, what the fundamental error in the scheme of things really was. Separation of Church and State, unadulterated political administration and a truly Biblical visible Church were as wellknown in the Middle Ages as the principles of radio. Skeptics are pointed to



scholastic theology, canonical law, and the jurisprudence of those ages, for illustrations and corroborations.

Imagine, then, the surprise, when a man who had been born, raised, educated, and honored with the title of Doctor of Divinity in this hopelessly jumbled-up age, a man who was a product (correctly understood) of such an age, when such a man stepped into the limelight by publishing treatises such as the Appeal to the German Nobility, Faithful Admonition to all Christians to Avoid Tumult and Rebellion, On the Limits of Secular Authority, articles which shook the very cornerstone of medieval society! Attacks on existing conditions had not been rare. A cry for a reformation had long been heard throughout the Holy Roman Empire, but this new voice was really new to the world at that time. A new departure in principle and practice was here set forth.

Luther's ideas and suggestions were based first, last, and always on the Word of God, and the applications he made of them were likewise according to Scripture and the executive ability usually called common sense, in solving indifferent matters (adiaphora).

"Let every soul be subject unto higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God". These words and the following verses of Romans 13, and 1 Pet. 2, were his starting-point. Proceeding from this, he aimed his first blow at the double code of laws existing at that time: All ranks of society are equal before the government. Through centuries of custom, tradition, and farsighted visionaries on the Papal throne, the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation had become nothing more than a synonym of the Holy Catholic Apostolic Christian Church. The crowning of Charlemagne by the Pope, the fate of Henry the Seventh at the hands of Hildebrand, the propositions of Innocent the Third, are all examples of the studied, skilful tactics employed by the leaders of the Church in bringing the secular leaders under control, and using them to their advantages. At the same time, however, they took great care to cut off any possible retreat by way of retaliation, by introducing the double code of morals. While on  
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the one hand they wanted kings and emperors to rule their domains to the



advantage of the Church, the clergy themselves claimed a right to be controlled directly by the Pope and his executives, irrespective of their nationality. If a subject had committed some crime, the Church was careful to demand justice at the hands of civil authorities; if, however, an ecclesiastic had become guilty of some foul deed, he was to be judged not by the Emperor or king in the last instance, but by a system of courts and a code of laws instituted by the Church. It will not require a very thorough study of such a system to see how it paved the way to an unlimited amount of intrigue and injustice, and a steady usurpation of political control. Luther was not slow in denouncing this entanglement as the root of all such evils as the degeneration of the clergy, the bitterness of the laity, who keenly felt such injustice, and the superficiality of religion. In his Appeal to the German Nobility he therefore stressed points such as the following: no imperial ordinance, no appointment of dignitaries should be submitted to the Pope for ratification; no reservation of cases (which in every instance was certain to favor the clergy); render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; Once these measures were carried out, the right of the Pope Church to impose taxes by force, the political dominion of the Pope in Naples and Sicily, and all other wrongs arising from the interweaving of Church and State would follow as a matter of course. Separation of Church and State, i.e. doctrinal matters and the conscientious care of souls for the clergy, political matters for political rulers, those were the ideals for which Luther stood; these were the principles expressed by him in his Appeal to the German Nobility. What bearing this had on the Peasant War will be brought out later.

Separation of Church and State must necessarily affect the attitude of subjects to rulers, and vice versa. The Middle Ages had experienced the development of a weapon in the hands of the Church, which proved to be a most decisive, in fact the deciding factor, in many issues. This was the corrupted office of the Keys, which appeared in its monstrous perversion under the names of excommunication and interdict. True to form, the Church had recognized in it



a direct appeal to, and influence over, the minds and consciences of the ignorant, deluded and superstitious laity. If a king or emperor had become guilty of some deed which was detrimental to the prestige of the Pope, and refused to make amends, he was put under the curse of excommunication. This act was to deprive him of the benefits of the sacraments, of a Christian burial, and to absolve his subjects of all obedience to him, thus throwing wide the gates to revolt! Again, whole cities, or provinces, or congregations, or even entire nations would come under this curse. Such a curse would not be lifted until the Church's wrath had been appeased by subscribing to certain demands, or by some happy stroke of Fate which made it more expedient simply to nullify the interdict and again receive the stricken party into the good graces of the Church. The machinations of this system can easily be seen in the stormy career of Henry the Seventh. More than once did his people, his armies, and even his children turn against him because of the terrible influence of the bull of excommunication. In every case of excommunication of a ruler or of a district, bloodshed and revolt were imminent, if not actually in sway.

It requires no explanation to show how the relation of ruler to subject and vice versa was entirely corrupted by centuries of such practice. When Luther raised his voice in his stand on Scriptures, he proclaimed a system, which spelled the doom of--again--a political machine whose cogs were Church and State. First of all, he says, the Pope should be excluded from politics. Not before this step was taken could there be any hope of a real revision of government administration.

Having stated this point clearly, Luther goes on to say: Rulers are in power for the welfare of their domains, not the domains for the enrichment and aggrandizement of the lords. That is their God-given duty. Theirs is the right to levy taxes for the support and furtherance of peace and



prosperity in their domain, and for a reasonable recompense of their labors. They have no right to burden their people with uncalled-for restrictions for purposes of conquest, luxury and extravagance. They should not plunge into strife and bloodshed unless the welfare of the country and the dignity of their office demand it but rather make overtures and try compromises before taking up the sword. They have the sword to wield also as avengers of wrong and protectors of the weak in their lands. They should not meddle with religious matters; wrong doctrine should be fought with books, not with sword and fire, except when a system of religion should arise which directly viciously undermined morals and good order. Luther is addressing Christian rulers of so-called Christian countries. Therefore he urges them to pray for the welfare of their subjects, and for peace and prosperity.



Turning to the subjects, he says: Your rulers are there because God has instituted them. Whether they are good, sensible men, or evil, headstrong tyrants makes no difference. The duty of the subject is to obey and honor and support his lord, even to the extent of laying down his life and forfeiting his earthly possessions.

Since he addresses so-called Christian subjects, he proceeds to distinguish between the Christian and the ungodly subject. Christians need no civil government because they have a higher ruler. Due to the fact, however, that the ungodly, the sinners, the unregenerate are by nature lawless and rebellious, Christians should be an example to them in life, and should, therefore, submit to civil ordinance for the order and welfare of all. If this is not done, the Gospel is hindered and cannot do its wholesome work. Every attempt to overthrow the government should be resisted. In no wise should Christians rebel against the government. If the rulers are wicked, they should be petitioned to do otherwise, but should not be attacked. It is entirely wrong to attempt to quench tyranny with rebellion; Christians should rather suffer a wrong with the consolation that they suffer it because of the Gospel. In matters of religion, where, rulers act and demand things contrary to God's Word, Christians should not obey, but rather suffer persecution. Above all, they also should pray for the rulers and the welfare of the country.

Luther saw the time coming when his principles of government would be put to a test. Contrary to the impressions some students of history succeed in gathering from his life and works, he did study the times. It was inevitable that he should take a vital interest in the development of things. In the first place, as shown before, his principles were



diametrically opposed to the old scheme. With them he had to stand or fall, for his conscience was bound to them by Scripture. In the second place, Luther, a peasant's son, had risen from the lowly ranks to a height which no other figure of his age attained. He was at the pinnacle of his career, in a certain sense, for no one dared to lay hands on him. He simply commanded respect. Naturally, therefore, the eyes of all were fixed on him, eagerly awaiting a decision either way from the peasant's son, who told kings and princes and the Pope the unvarnished truth. And what did he say and do?

He could have been silent; he could have evaded the making of statements by saying that it did not really concern him. But Luther was neither a coward, nor a wish-washy pacifist. He was a German, and keenly interested in the weal and woe of his beloved country, especially his Saxony. The Elector of Saxony, Frederick the Wise, had accepted the new faith and had applied its doctrines to himself and his country. His domains were the best regulated in the nation and suffered the least damage in the Revolt. He had more than an inkling of Luther's importance and value, and certainly would have made it possible for him to pass the stormy period in comparative security, had Luther but hinted at it. But the spirit which pervaded the Appeal to the German Nobility and the other tracts on government would not be restrained in the face of a crisis. He was thoroughly acquainted with the ever-increasing tyranny of bishops and princes, and the hostility of the peasantry, whose endurance was taxed to the breaking-point, humanly speaking. Revolt could be averted only by a radical reform, and to Luther, revolt and revolutionary sentiment were most dreadful things. Therefore, he warned with telling force against it. He rebuked the sins of the high and mighty, showing them that they were preparing for their own ruin by making life miserable for others, and, what was far worse, by spurning their pleas for evangelical ministers. Turning to the peasantry, he admitted



that in many things they had just cause for grievances, but warned them against striving for these ends with force and revolt. For revolt makes a crime out of the best cause.

The first rumblings of the Peasant War were heard late in 1524, in the regions of the Upper Rhine, around Lake Constance. After repeated ominous demonstrations, the nobles resorted to parleying, in order to gain sufficient time to prepare for armed resistance. The peasants allowed themselves to be duped by promises and empty phrases, until the early months of 1525, when they became impatient and suspicious. From Lake Constance the movement spread into Swabia with rapid strides, and from there all over Southern and Central Germany, gaining in strength and viciousness.

That the original intentions of this movement were not bloodshed and destruction, but an earnest plea for improvement of conditions in general, is shown by a document known as, "The Twelve Articles of the Peasantry", drawn up about the end of February, 1525. This document was a summary of, and an improvement over, similar articles of earlier date, and were approved of by all peasants. The author is not definitely known; Katt, in his series of articles opines that it was Christoph Schappeler, a Zwinglian preacher of Memmingen. At any rate, the composer was of Carlstadt's, Muenzer's and Zwingli's type, for all the articles, with the exception of the first and last, show a hopeless confusion and misunderstanding of political matters and Christian liberty. Scripture passages were quoted freely and in a way that appealed strongly to peasants with a vague notion of Christian liberty and its relation to civil government. The introduction to the articles complains of blaming the new Gospel for the disorders among the peasantry, and assures the sincerity with which the articles were drawn up. Article I asks for the right to appoint their own preachers. Article II - XI enumerate the various grievances and suggest the remedies for conditions.



Article XII declares willingness to withdraw any or all articles, if they can be shown to contradict Scriptures.

In order to give these articles prestige and to gain favor, they were sent to Luther for criticism, in the hope that the common enemy, the tyranny of rulers, would bring about a favorable reply. Due to difficulties of travel and poor postal service, Luther received the articles at Easter-time, about the middle of April, while he was at Eisleben organizing a new school. Up to that time, he had only sympathy for the down trodden peasants, and resentment for the oppressors, especially for the part that the bishops and cloisters played in running the country. Of the atrocities which had been committed in the meantime he as yet knew nothing, or his answer would have been entirely different.

Luther saw at a glance that he could never endorse the cause of the peasants as represented in the twelve articles, and penned his reply, Admonition of Peace, accordingly. He states in the preface that his silence in this matter would lead to no good, and that the importance of the issue demanded a straight forward answer; therefore he would not mince his words.

In the first part, he goes directly to the root of the evil: the tyranny of rulers and bishops. "In the first place, we have no one to thank for such uproar and tumult but you, princes and rulers, especially you blind bishops and mad priests, who obstinately continue to rave and rant against the holy Gospel, although you know that it is the truth and are unable to refute it, and in worldly matters know no better than to oppress and extort, in order to keep up your pride and arrogance, so that the poor man is no longer able to endure it. Mark well, the sword is at your throats! Your false security and obstinacy will break your necks!" He shows no mercy in denouncing wrongs. No one can hinder the Gospel with impunity. Sooner or later dire results will be reaped. Neither can anyone blame the new Gospel, nor Luther for the uproar, because the Gospel, and Luther on the basis of it, have always taught obedience to the government, have always denounced



revolt as most unchristian. The "Mordpropheten", Muenzer, Pfeiffer, Hubmaier, etc., who have perverted the Gospel and misquoted him, are to blame for this present uproar. He begs the rulers for God's sake to use discretion, not to give way to their tempers as heretofore, but to improve conditions in their countries. For governments are instituted<sup>not</sup> for wantonness and gain, but for the welfare of the subjects.

Since the peasants were on the aggressive and since they had applied to him, he had to address himself to them at greater length, and go into greater detail. His words cannot be misunderstood. In substance, he says: They have heard from him repeatedly that the rulers are seriously at fault, especially for hindering the Gospel. Nevertheless, the big point for the peasants to observe is, to keep their cause free from reproach, especially in regard to the preaching of the Gospel. Their grievances are just to a great extent, but to aim at settling them by revolt makes nothing but a crime of their cause. They have been listening to fanatical leaders like Muenzer, who are spreading their devilish ideas under cover of the Gospel. Let them take care to avoid such men. The peasants are at fault in the following points:

First, they call themselves a Christian organization and claim to follow the Word of God in every step; therefore, great care must be exercised not to misuse the Word of God.

Second, they have become guilty of such abuse, for have they not set themselves against the powers that be? And God says, Matth. 26,52: All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword. How can they answer such a charge?

Third, they call the government unjust for hindering the Gospel and for the grievous tyranny of the rulers. But the fact that rulers are unjust is no excuse for revolt. No one has a right to punish injustice but the government.

Fourth, the peasants have absolutely no right, neither as Christians nor as subjects, to demand abolition of tithes, servitude and the restrictions and burdens mentioned in the remaining articles.

If the government refuses to give them evangelical preachers, let the



peasants themselves choose and support them. Should the rulers object to this also, let the peasants go to a different place, where the Gospel is preached, for it is not bound to one place.

In view of these facts, then, they are placed before an alternative: Either they drop the matter altogether and suffer as Christians should, or they drop their Christian title, and pursue their aims in another way.

In the third part of the Admonition, Luther addresses himself to both rulers and peasants with an earnest appeal to come to their senses and settle the strife by a peaceful, openminded discussion. (XVI, 45-70)

The same spirit pervades Luther's preface and conclusion to a compromise drawn up between the "Schwäbische Bund", (alliance of nobles in Southern Germany), and the peasantry. This compromise was, on the whole, very reasonable, wherefore Luther very earnestly pleads with the peasants to desist from violence and to ignore the vicious propagandizing of Muenzer and his tribe.

Notice how Luther decries the glaring self-contradiction: Taking the name of Christ, but flatly disregarding Scripture. Notice how Luther uncovers the faults of the rulers: Selfishness and unwarranted tyranny over conscience. The conclusion is inevitable: Luther has not changed his <sup>principles</sup> as laid down in his writings before 1524.

The ink had scarcely dried on the last words of his Admonition, when the news of hair-raising, bloodcurdling anarchy reached Luther. The peasants had not waited for a reply to their Twelve Articles. Why? Thomas Muenzer and Pfeiffer.

Muenzer had a checkered career when he came into the limelight in the Peasant Revolt. On his travels he had come to Prague, where he imbibed the communistic principles of the Taborites. In 1520 he was called to a pastorate at Zwickau and thus came under the influence of the "Heavenly Prophets", who claimed a direct illumination by the Holy Spirit, and believed in a bloody reformation and the Millenium. Muenzer went them one better and conspired against the government. For this effort he was expelled from Zwickau. In 1523 we find him at Allstedt in Thuringia, pursuing a



similar course. Elector Frederick and his brother John heard of him and upon investigation ordered him to leave. Muehlhausen, a free imperial city was his next headquarters. Luther had warned the citizens of this fanatic, but his warning arrived too late. Nevertheless, Muehlhausen soon tired of him and Nuremberg was blessed with his presence. Here he attempted to publish a violent reply to Luther's views on revolt, defending the sovereignty of the people and the necessity of a new distribution of property. Result, expulsion from Nuremberg. The district of Lake Constance with the Swiss Anabaptists and Hubmaier seemed prospective, but the common people did not take kindly to Muenzer's north-German dialect.

In 1525 he and his colleague Pfeiffer, an ex-monk, effected a coup d'etat in Muehlhausen and the election of a new city-council of Muenzer's preference. From this point of vantage he thundered against priests, rulers, and Luther alike. Luther's principles of government and his Gospel were especially hateful to Muenzer, because they were too conservative. His idea of reformation demanded force of arms and the extermination of the godless and the rulers.

Heretofore he had not caused serious trouble outside of Muehlhausen, but now the success of the revolutionists in Southern Germany captivated him, and he prepared to join them. Progress was altogether too slow for Pfeiffer, however, and he made an expedition into Stollberg and Mansfeld, spreading destruction and plundering castles and cloisters. Muenzer, not to be outdone, sent a diabolical letter to the miners in Mansfeld. Nothing was said of compromising with rulers. Destruction and pillage was his aim.

These instances are but samples of the activity of the "Mordpropheten". Multiply them fifty-fold, and an approximate estimate of their diabolical effects can be made. The wholesale torture and massacre of nobles at Weinsberg also is an instance too outstanding to pass over it unmentioned.

Luther was so shocked, when he heard of these outrages, that he promptly left Eisleben and traveled through Mansfeld and the neighboring uprising



districts, preaching and doing his utmost to counteract the fanatics. Several times he barely escaped the fury of the bloodthirsty hordes. His stay was cut short by the news of his Elector's death, May 5th. He hastened back to Wittenberg for the funeral.

This harrowing experience had an effect upon Luther which changed, not his principles, but his action. Heretofore he had thought well of the peasantry at large, and had tried to correct their erroneous ideas. Now that his warnings had been cast to the wind and the tumult was spreading instead of abating, he spared no force. His next tract was a short but very severe one, "Against the Murderous and Raving Peasants", written before the middle of May, 1525. The following is a short summary of this pamphlet.

In the Admonition to Peace he had only instructed and criticized the peasants, because that was their request. They seem to have forgotten this Appeal, for they are behaving like mad dogs. Now it is evident that their Twelve Articles were mere pretexts and subterfuges. Their's is simply the work of the devil, and that arch devil of Muehlhausen knows nothing but murder and pillage. Since the peasants have shown themselves to be such scoundrels, they must be addressed in an entirely different tone. They have committed three horrible sins:

First, they have wilfully and wantonly broken the oath of allegiance to their lords, and thereby forfeited their lives just as any other criminal.

Second, they have incited revolt; they rob and plunder cloisters and castles which are not their property, thereby lowering themselves to the level of highwaymen. Revolt is a much greater sin than murder. Whereas murder does not attack the powers that be, revolt is aimed directly at them, thereby endangering the lives of everyone. Hence it is the duty of every subject to resist uprisings with all available force.

Third, they attempt to hide such heinous sins with the Gospel, by calling themselves Christians; they take oaths, and force people to assist their



cause. Thus they have stained themselves with every conceivable crime.

His advice to the rulers is: Traitors and mobs must feel the arm of the law; therefore spare no forces to put down the revolt. To neglect this means to become guilty of all the crimes of the peasants. Christian rulers will, however, remember that there are many innocent people in the hordes of peasants who have been forced to support the revolt. If these are captured, the rulers ought to fare mercifully with them because they are subjects who have suffered oppression and intimidation.

In conclusion, he again stresses the sacredness of the obligation to put down revolt, and defends his severe words by a sentence which hints at the tenor of his next article: If any one thinks these words too severe, let him remember that revolt is unbearable. (XVI, 71-77)

These words were written at the height of uproar and before real armed opposition met the hordes of marauders. Anxious looks were cast at the war-clouded horizon. Will the rulers succeed in quenching the rebellion? What will be the country's fate, if the peasants win out? Luther was not afraid to tell both parties what ailed them. He knew full well that he had hit both rulers and subjects squarely between the eyes, and that in every event someone would be itching to settle the score with him after the fray was over.

Not long after Luther had penned this powerful invective, the pendulum began retracing its course with unmistakeable certainty: in favor of the nobles. To be sure, some of these dignitaries, by skilful diplomacy, managed the hostile peasants in a way which tended to weaken some political rival, but on the whole, feelings were bitter enough to outweigh such comparative trifles. In Thuringia the Count of Mansfeld, Duke George of Saxony and his evangelical son-in-law, Philip of Hesse, joined forces and attacked a force of 8,000 peasants gathered by Muenzer at Frankenhausen. Miserably equipped as these unfortunates were, they had implicit confidence



in Muenzer, who promised them everything from certain victory to immortality, if they would listen to him, and not rely on force of arms. This enthusiast was the first to take to his heels when the guns began to roar; he left his army in dreadful confusion to the mercy of the victors. He was captured by chance and eventually paid the price of his career with his head, His colleague Pfeiffer fared no better.

Elector John, successor to Frederick the Wise, had not arrived in time for this battle. Instead of cooling what wrathful spirits were in him, by bloody executions, as did Duke George, he subdued the last vestiges of the uproar with the mildness and kindness which characterized him and his deceased brother. Philip of Hesse did not follow the example of his father-in-law, but rather that of the Elector.

In Alsace, Swabia, the Palatinate and the other infected districts, decisive battles were fought from May 15 until the beginning of June. Here again the evangelical rulers used common sense in restoring order after the crisis, while the Catholic princes, together with such bishops as held temporal powers, took the greatest pains to outdo the cruelty of the former insurgents. Thousands upon thousands of defenseless peasants were butchered. Thriving villages were leveled by fire, so that Luther rightly said: "It seems that all the devils of hell have now left the peasants and possessed the princes and nobles". Estimates vary, but it is safe to assume that about 130,000 peasants lost their lives in and after the uprisings. A cry of indignation at such senseless cruelty went through Germany, not only from the peasants, but from all classes. Why should such things happen? Why did the Peasant War bring such times into the country? As usual, people will look for some one to whom the fault can be laid, and in this case, Luther proved to be the scape-goat. This is nothing remarkable, if one considers that Luther had stood as a boulder of granite throughout the storm. He had repeatedly denounced the wrongs of the rulers, of the bishops and of the peasants; he had refused to modify his stand in the least. He had not ceased to speak to the point, even after Muenzer, that bitter enemy of Luther's,



had been caught and was sentenced to death. The mind of the public is ever inclined to believe evil rather than good reports. When, therefore, Cochlaeus, Emser and even Erasmus, not to mention Duke George, pointed the accusing finger at Luther, public sentiments followed them for it was easier to listen to many, than to investigate. Emser for instance, says: "Dieser hat die Menge beredet, ihn fuer einen Propheten zu halten und seine toerichten Gedanken Orakeln vom Himmel glichzustellen. Das wie vom Trunke betaeubte deutsche Volk erhebt sich, ihm folgend in schrecklichem Tumult und wendet die Waffen blutig gegen sich selbst." (Quoted by Grisar I, p.508).

As a result of torrents of such propaganda, Luther was grossly misunderstood and slandered. Being accustomed to vile attacks, he at first calmly ignored them. When, however, his good friend Caspar Mueller, Chancellor of Mansfeld, urged him to publish a written defense for the benefit of his friends, Luther wrote the pamphlet known as the "Sendbrief", which is a defense of the tract "Against the Murderous and Raving Peasants".

In the introduction to the "Sendbrief", he says: "It is no use to silence these vile voices, for they will never cease to twist and turn my words. Far better it were to ignore them altogether and let them be consumed with anger at being spurned thus". (XVI, 77ff). Then he takes up charge after charge and refutes them all, thereby giving another summary of his principles on government in Christian countries.

1. Both the rebels and their sympathizers are at fault. The latter are defending and pitying those whom God wants punished and put away. (80) If such an answer seems too severe, let it be remembered that a rebel does not deserve a sensible answer, for he will not accept it, that applies to the peasants. This is not the time to prate of mercy, but to take heed of God's Word. Hence the booklet in question will stand in spite of what the world thinks. - If God's Word is to be preached, one must also preach wrath, as St. Paul does, Rom. 13,2. (81).

2. Luther is accused of duplicity: that he first advocates mercy, then



severity. Where, he asks, were those who now prate of mercy, where were they when the peasants were murdering and pillaging? Were the rebels merciful to their brds? Not a word was said of mercy. Now, when they receive just deserts, they want mercy! Anyone can rob, rape, pillage and murder, and thus when he is caught, cry out: Christ said, be merciful, therefore do not kill me! Such is the argument of these peasant-sympathizers. Is this mercy, to put aside all government, and punishment, and let every rogue do as he pleases, and in addition be merciful to the villain? The peasants want injustice punished, but they themselves are the most unjust and cruel and merciless vandals in the world.

Luther is accused of being merciless throughout, of sparing none of the peasants. If that is understood rightly, it is true; but it is misquoted. Where did Luther ever teach that? Does he not urge, in the same book, not only to punish the peasants, but also to be merciful to those who surrender and plead for mercy? Where do some people keep their eyes? That is flagrant, vicious, biased criticism, to quote only what suits one's purpose. (82f).

3. Some have misunderstood his booklet, due to delusion or weakness. They should note that there is a kingdom of God, and a kingdom of the world. Whoever can keep these two separate, cannot misunderstand the booklet. God's kingdom is one of mercy, that of the world is one of wrath and severity.

Whoever confuses the two, as the rebels did, would put wrath into God's kingdom, and mercy into the world's kingdom. That is putting Satan into heaven, and God into hell. At first the peasants wanted to fight for the Gospel as Christians and kill others, when they should have been merciful. Now, when the government comes upon them, they want mercy.

Who is at fault? He that robs and murders, or he that suffers such violence? A fine justice and mercy it would be, to be merciful to the culprit and punish the victim! Now the peasants say that Luther catered to the cruel princes, when the peasants themselves were ten times worse than the rulers. For if the peasants had been victors, no just person would have had a chance.



Even though the peasants were offered favorable terms, they spurned them. It is as plain as day that their only purpose was wantonness. The more they were admonished, the more obstinate they became. Scripture says very well, that out of pure mercy, the government must be unmerciful, i.e. it must be harsh to the offenders in order to protect the innocent subjects.

Luther's words do not condemn those who have surrendered and have been defeated, but only the obstinate, headstrong, vicious ones, who will not listen to reason. (84f.)

It is said that the rulers are unreasonable and cruel. Does that concern Luther's booklet? Why blame Luther for some other's faults? If they misuse their authority, they cannot lay that to Luther. His booklet does not say what the rulers deserve, but what the peasants have merited. When the right time comes, the rulers will hear from him concerning their faults. As far as his office of teaching is concerned, ruler and subject are alike to him. The rulers think none too kindly of him for what he has told them, but that does not trouble him in the least.

If his advice had been followed at the outset, and quick justice had been meted out to a few, the others would have desisted. But it has been God's will to teach both parties a lesson: the peasants, that they should see how fortunate they were to live in peace and pay a little for the preservation of peace; the lords, that they should learn good, efficient government, and preserve respect for the government. (89ff.)

4. It is said that many pious people have been forced to support the peasants, and that they have suffered unjust punishment. Such people speak as if they had never heard of God's Word. In the first place, no one can force a man to do anything. If those who were forced had been Christians, they would have died rather than do anything against God's Word. If this excuse holds good, no one could punish wrong, for the devil drives, "forces", people to sin. In the second place, ignorance of God's Word is no excuse. A Christian should know his duty.



The Gospel has come to Germany; many persecute it, few desire it and those who accept it are lazy and indolent. Is it any wonder that God chastises them for such despising of His Word? Was is so terrible for just this reason, that the innocent and helpless suffer. If one would live in a commonwealth, he must also bear the burdens, and fulfil his obligations, even though he may not deserve onerous duties, which his godless neighbor has incurred. That is necessary for the common good. The Germans can be thankful that no greater catastrophe has befallen them. God can again raise up the peasants, as someone far worse than they. (90f.)

5. Luther himself is accused of teaching revolt, because he urges every one who can, to oppose and slay the rebels. Here one must distinguish between robber and rebel. A robber and murderer does not attack the government itself, but its subjects. He fears the government. But a rebel attacks government directly, so that there is no comparison between him and a murderer. Therefore, the common good demands it that everyone resist the rebels. Whoever shrinks from this duty is a traitor and worse than a murderer. That holds good even in heathen countries. (94f.)

From the foregoing one can readily see that Luther advocates the right course against rebels, without denying mercy to captives and those who surrendered.

6. Luther did not encourage the revengeful tyrants in their cruelty. These fools are not promoting just punishment and ~~restoring~~ order, but seek to quench their thirst for blood, now that they are victorious. In addition, they are resisting the Gospel, and are trying to reinstate the former deplorable tyranny of the Pope. They will reap what they sow. (96f.)

7. Luther has stated that in these dangerous times one can earn Heaven with murder and bloodshed. What a fine chance to catch him in a self-contradiction! Even his choice of words is criticized! Such accusers entirely disregard the fact that he is addressing a Christian government and is directing their course against godless rebellion. If a government neglects



*Samson*

the duty of shedding guilty blood, how shall Simpson, Samuel, David and others be justified? (97f.)

With a note of weariness and disgust in his words, Luther concludes with another appeal to use common sense in judging his booklet and the entire disagreeable matter, for this is now the third time he has explained the matter of Christian government in detail.

At the risk of "marking time", Luther's attitude toward government and anarchy has been summarized three times. Anyone who has followed Boehmer's advice and has "heard Luther" cannot help but come to the conclusion that "the most misunderstood man of the 16th century" ought to be called "the most level-headed man" of that century. Perhaps his rigid consistency and fearless front was a thing so rare that contemporaries were at a loss how to understand him. When one thinks of the ridicule with which Erasmus and others regard their times, this view seems quite acceptable.

Not only Luther's enemies, but also many friends, criticize him severely. As late as 1530, when his father was on the death-bed, Luther did not dare to risk the journey to the bedside, because of the hatred of the peasants. Duke George demanded his arrest time and again. The propagation of the Gospel suffered severely because of the sentiments of the people. These facts and others too numerous to mention bring one to the conclusion that Luther was not only misunderstood, but also viciously misinterpreted. The entire guilt of the Peasant War was laid at his feet, regardless of facts, which actually reverse the verdict.

Rediculous attempts were made at his time to explain in some way, the man's actions, in order to spread a veil of condescending pity and tolerance over his "inhuman, rash, scurrilous attacks on everybody and everything". What better could be expected of a man who attacked the two mightiest systems of his day, Church and State? Thus he is relegated to the rants of irresponsible crack-brained fanatics.



A thoroughgoing, unbiased history of the late World War is, as yet an impossibility, because not everything that played a part in the conflict has been discovered. It would be best to look for such an account twenty-five or fifty years hence. This plea ought to modify the resentment one feels, the shameful way in which Luther was vilified in the 16th century. Such a feeling vanishes when some present day students of history show not one degree of progress over centuries gone by. The same charges are brought against him; the same slanders are repeated as though they had never been refuted a thousand times over.

The Encyclopaedia Britannica, says: "When the rebellion was at its height and Thomas Muenzer had sent forth fiery proclamations urging the peasantry 'not to let the blood cool on their swords', Luther issued the pamphlet, which casts a stain on his whole life, in which he hounds on the ruling classes to suppress the insurgents with all violence" (17,138.) Hartman Grisar very skilfully minimizes Luther's plea to be merciful to captive peasants and to those who have been forced to aid the supporters. He ridicules Luther's sense of duty over against rulers and peasants, entirely disregarding the fact that people looked to him for opinions. How he can justify such an attitude in the face of the political meddlings and underhanded tactics of the Roman Church at Luther's time, which certainly were a thousandfold worse than Luther's advice, is quite beyond the comprehension of the writer. Perhaps Grisar does not intend to justify his criticism. The same applies to the Britannica. The only stain Luther's pamphlet "Against the Murderous and Raving Peasants" could possibly cast on its author is that of unflinching firmness and fearlessness at a time <sup>of</sup> national endangerment. <sub>A</sub>

Fortunately, Luther had some faults common to mortals. These have been exploited to full advantage by adverse critics. How they glory in picturing him as an uncouth, scurrilous writer! At the same time, they calmly pass over the invectives which Thomas Muenzer hurled at the rulers of Mansfeld; in fact, they seem to be totally unacquainted with the frank, forceful



language which was in universal use at that time. Had Luther possessed the smooth, unoffensive, polished style of Melanchthon, perhaps he would have been disregarded to a great extent. He called a spade a spade, and if anyone felt that the words applied to his person, well and good; such was their purpose! Even Erasmus defends him on that scarcely saying: "The diseases of the time needed a stern physician". His great concern for the fate of the government is labeled as catering to princes, as "a weakness which cropped out at a very opportune time", that is, when the peasants, whom he had formerly pitied, were losing out. Let those who accuse Luther of such cowardice answer this question: Why should a man who trembled neither at Leipzig, nor at the burning of the papal bull of excommunication, nor at Worms, times when his life was in far greater danger than during the Peasant War, why should such a man cater to princes, when there was nothing to gain and everything to lose by cowardice? Hand in hand with the accusation of cowardice goes the charge of inconsistency. He is censured for taking turns at reproving rulers and subjects. This criticism shows ignorance of Luther's principles, which applied to both rulers and peasants. Whenever he discusses matters of government, he leaves neither party untouched. In his Appeal to the German Nobility he points out the mistakes made by princes, but also shows how the peasants are thereby led to increase their guilt. In his Admonition of Peace he again denounces the tyranny of princes, but also the folly and disobedience of the peasantry. In the "severe pamphlet", the peasants are taken to task for their madness, but the rulers are reproved for tardiness in administering justice while the revolt was in less advanced statements. The "Sendbrief" finally brings out the soundness of his advice, and effectively clears Luther of all charges made against him.

The sands of Time will continue to flow, man will continue to be essentially the same. Great men will continue to arise and accomplish great things. Adverse critics and calumniators will continue to attack and vilify



them, but their true value will weather the storms and will stand unshaken as a testimony and an incentive to future generations. Fiat applicatio.

(About 7000 words.)

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